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C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 000527

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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: SECURITY: BAD AND GETTING WORSE IN QUETZALTENANGO

REF: GUATEMALA 457

Classified By: Political Officer George Matthews for reasons 1.4 b & d

11. (U) SUMMARY. A recent trip by Emboffs to Quetzaltenango, in western Guatemala, found widespread concern over increasing insecurity, a significant lack of confidence in the ability of the national police (PNC) to address the issue, and a belief that Guatemala City is pushing its problems to the area. Leaders and community activists also expressed concern that a slowing economy and a drop in remittances from the U.S. would lead to an increase in crime.

While none noted any significant problem with narcotrafficking in Xela or other cities in the department of Quetzaltenango, some expressed concern about reports of narcotrafficking activity in Coatepeque, a town near the Mexican border. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On May 5 and 6, Emboffs traveled to Quetzaltenango (Xela) in the western highlands and met with government officials and representatives of the private sector, civil society and academics, along with a local gun store owner. (see reftel.)

View from Local Politicians

13. (C) Mayor Jorge Rolando "Mito" Barrientos works from a large corner office in the Xela municipal center, an ornate 19th century building with a football field-sized central courtyard. Barrientos, a member of the GANA political party, asserted that despite problems with crime and violence Xela is still far safer than Guatemala City or many other parts of the country. He acknowledged that gang activity was a problem, but not a significant one. Barrientos estimated that there are six to eight local gangs operating in Xela, with 30 to 50 members in each gang. However, he said there has been a noticeable increase in both organized crime and gang activity over the past year, which Barrientos attributed to a crackdown on criminal elements in Guatemala City.

(NOTE: The embassy is not aware of any particular crackdown or offensive by the PNC or military against criminals in Guatemala City over the past year. END NOTE) He believes the PNC is under-staffed, under-funded and under-equipped to properly do their job in his city. According to the local Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH), there are only 462 PNC agents in the entire department of Quetzaltenango. The department has a population of over 620,000, which averages about one agent for every 1,350 residents. Barrientos said he is not aware of significant narcotrafficking activity in Xela. The most significant drug problem in his city revolves around young people, mostly college students, using and selling illicit substances.

14. (C) Mayra Rivera, Chief Deputy to the governor, works out of a 180-year building that was the former home of a coffee baron. Rivera is a career civil servant and has worked for several governors in the last 16 years. She echoed many of Barrientos' comments, saying the security situation was not as bad in Quetzaltenango as in other departments, but that it had gotten noticeably worse over the past year. She also attributed much of the increase in crime to criminal organizations being pushed out of Guatemala City. Rivera also believed that migrants from other parts of Central America, especially El Salvador, were making the security situation worse. Like Barrientos, she lacked confidence in the situation worse. Like Barrientos, she lacked confidence in the local PNC, which reports directly to the department's governor, but which she said is largely controlled from Guatemala City. Rivera estimated that at least 20 percent of local PNC agents are engaged in some form of corruption. However, she said that she has seen no evidence that they are involved in more serious crimes, such as murder-for-hire or kidnapping, as in other departments. Rivera also said that she is not aware of a significant problem with narcotraffickers in the department of Quetzaltenango. However, she did note some concern about Coatepeque, a town in the western part of the department about 30 miles from the Mexican border. Rivera said she had heard reports that Mexican narcotraffickers were beginning to operate in the area.

View from the Human Rights Office

15. (SBU) Julio Cesar Fernandez, Deputy Chief of the local PDH office, said his 12-person office handles about 15 clients a day, and much of the case work involves victims of domestic violence. However, Fernandez said, over the past year, PDH has seen an increase in murders, assaults and robberies aboard public buses, threats against judges and prosecutors, demonstrations over deteriorating social conditions, and acts of vigilante justice. Fernandez said he is aware of at least seven instances where mobs badly beat or burned individuals suspected of committing a crime. Fernandez said citizens, especially in rural communities, were losing faith in state institutions and taking justice into their own hands. Fernandez also believes there is a serious problem with corruption in the PNC, and had been told that senior PNC commissioners can earn more than Q50,000 (USD 6,500) per month working for organized crime. On average, PNC commissioners earn a salary of Q7,600 (USD 1,000) per month. Fernandez and his staff said they have received no threats this year, but did have a bull's skull and bag of intestines thrown over the wall of their building last year. Fernandez attributed the lack of threats to the fact that the office provides mainly assistance to victims of domestic violence, and so does not pose a threat to organized crime.

View from the Private Sector

16. (SBU) The president of Xela's Chamber of Commerce, Manolo Armando Veliz, runs a real estate business, distributes food, liquor and other types of products to bars and restaurants, and owns a local internet service provider. In total, about 40 people work for him at his various businesses. Veliz has also seen an increase in crime over the past year to year-and-a-half. He noted that all types of criminal activity are on the rise, and attributed this to both increased pressure on organized crime and gangs in Guatemala City, which pushed them to Xela, and on the deteriorating economic climate. In particular, Veliz noted the drop in remittances coming into the area as a key factor pushing up the poverty rate, which is leading to an increase in crime. One example, noted Chamber of Commerce manager Alvaro Haroldo Solis, is the rise in street prostitution. Solis said it was very unusual to see prostitutes in the street a year ago, but it is becoming increasingly common. Veliz said local merchants are also increasingly the targets of kidnapping and

extortion rings, and that the business community is spending more on security. Veliz and Solis estimate that an average medium-size business spends about USD 1,300 per month on salaries for three armed guards and an electronic alarm system. Neither displayed any faith in the ability of the PNC to protect their businesses. They claimed that low-level corruption was widespread, and that PNC agents expect to receive free cases of beer or small presents in exchange for promises of increased protection.

View from the Indigenous Community

17. (SBU) Jordan Rodas, a lawyer and an indigenous leader, narrowly lost the race for mayor in 2007. Rodas came in second to Jorge Barrientos. He is now contemplating another run for mayor, or possibly a congressional seat. Rodas believes it is difficult, if not impossible, to harness the indigenous community into an effective political force. He said there are too many cultural differences among the various indigenous groups for them to be a unified force. Rodas estimated that 65 percent of the population of the department is indigenous and highly dependent on remittances, especially in the rural areas. He said that while indigenous people have not been persecuted based on their indigenous status they have been victimized by the general increase in lawlessness over the past year. He said indigenous people are doing particularly well in the city of Xela, where they own a number of small and medium-sized businesses. However, he said indigenous people in rural areas, who tend to be very poor, suffer from extremely high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse. Rodas said he has very little confidence in the institutions of state. His brother disappeared during the internal conflict (1960-1996), and so Rodas is particularly wary of the military. He also believes the PNC and judiciary are rife with corruption.

18. (U) Amparo Monzon is a young woman working for Education USA, an educational advisory center supported by the Embassy and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) that is housed at the Xela branch of the Guatemalan-American Institute (IGA), a bi-national center. Monzon's job is to help Guatemalan students find scholarships for undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States. Monzon says her job is an uphill battle, noting that Guatemala is among the worst countries in Latin America in terms of investment in education. She said public school teachers are poorly paid, averaging around USD 300 a month, which results in educators who have little interest in teaching. Poor teachers, combined with extreme poverty in many of the rural areas of the department, lead to extremely high drop out rates among students. Monzon estimates that 75 percent of indigenous students never reach high school. Monzon's job is made even more difficult by the deteriorating security situation. She frequently has to travel by public bus to give presentations to students and says she is scared every time. She also believes that it's not safe for her, as a woman, to walk the streets of Xela at night. Monzon attributes the rise in crime to the recent influx of gang members from El Salvador fleeing a government crackdown there. She says she is even starting to see gang activity in some of the very small communities she visits.

19. (U) COMMENT: Everyone we spoke with during our visit to Quetzaltenango agreed that the security situation had grown worse over the last year. Moreover, given the current economic climate and Quetzaltenango's distance from Guatemala City, there was no sense of optimism among those we spoke with that the area could expect significantly more resources from the national government to address these problems. Mayor Barrientos and the representatives of the Chamber of Commerce believe the best solution to resolving many of the area's problems is private investment, however, because of the global recession, they also believe it may be well over a year before they can expect any increase in economic activity. In the meantime, there is sense that residents of

Xela will make do with what they have. As Amparo Monzon from IGA said, "We're a poor country. We're used to having to struggle."
McFarland